



NEWS

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

December 12, 1996

Jeff Humphrey 602-640-2720
Ken Burton 602-640-2720

SIX CALIFORNIA CONDORS ARE RELEASED IN NORTHERN ARIZONA

Six California condors were released by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Peregrine Fund from the Vermilion Cliffs of northern Arizona today, the first time the giant birds have been seen in the skies of the American Southwest since 1924.

As staff members from the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the Peregrine Fund, and the Los Angeles Zoo stood by on the Vermilion Cliffs, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, using a hand-held two-way radio from a mile away, gave the order to release the birds and biologists opened the pens.

The Arizona release, undertaken under provisions of the Endangered Species Act, placed the birds--part of a population of 120 left in the world--near the Paria Plateau, about 115 miles north of Flagstaff, Arizona, an area that once supported the condor. The rugged Coconino County terrain provides the necessary remoteness, ridges, cliffs, and caves favored by the carrion-eating birds.

"This is the kind of story that clearly demonstrates that the Endangered Species Act works and works well," said Babbitt. "In 1973, Congress gave us a charter to save animals and plants from extinction. And here is a bird that in the 1980s was on the very brink of extinction. Thanks to a lot of hard work and an excellent captive-breeding program, we are able to restore a bit of balance. This is a success story that belongs to the American people."

The condors released today were bred in captivity in California at the Los Angeles Zoo and at the Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho. They were transferred in late October to the Vermilion Cliffs, where they have been kept away from people and allowed to acclimate to their new surroundings. Officially, they will be classified as an "experimental, non-essential" population under the Endangered Species Act, which allows for the birds to be managed with fewer restrictions than those normally covering endangered species. The classification also is designed to ensure that protected, reintroduced species are compatible with current and planned activities in the project area.

Peregrine Fund President William Burnham said he considered the experimental, non-essential designation a key to the condor reintroduction for Arizona and Utah. "This historic event is a

Office of Public Affairs
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240
Room 3447

(202) 208-5634
FAX (202) 219-2428

result of cooperation between the government and the private sector to include the people of southern Utah and northern Arizona," Burnham said.

Authorities today closed about 10 acres of Federal land around the release site, a temporary step that will remain in effect until the newly released birds have dispersed. If the initial release is successful, the Service will seek to release more condors over a period of years until there is a self-sustaining population of about 150 in the project area.

Nancy Kaufman, director of the Service's Southwest Region, which includes Arizona, said that "the condor success story is really more than a story about captive breeding. We have been able to raise these birds in captivity and conserve habitat at the same time. Captive breeding isn't the answer for every species, but it has worked well for the condor. The goal, of course, is to see the day when endangered species no longer need to be kept in zoos. Today, we made a major step in that direction."

The decision to release the condors in northern Arizona was made following an extensive series of meetings with local governments in southern Utah and northern Arizona, public hearings in both states, and a 3-month public comment period.

The condor recovery plan calls for two self-sustaining, geographically separate wild populations in order to reclassify the condor from endangered to threatened. Northern Arizona offers the new population a greater degree of security and isolation than they have had at release sites in California, where seven introductions have occurred.

Adult condors weigh up to 20 pounds and have a wingspan of nearly 10 feet. In prehistoric times, the bird ranged from Canada to Mexico, across the southern United States to Florida, and north on the East Coast to New York State. The birds managed to maintain a strong population until the settlement of the West, when shooting, poisoning, and egg collecting began to take a heavy toll. By 1987, the birds' population in the wild had dwindled to seven. In what was then a controversial decision, the Service decided to remove the remaining birds from the wild for captive breeding in a last-ditch effort to avert the condor's extinction.

Today, there are 120 condors in the world. In addition to the newly released Arizona birds, 20 are in the wild in California, 4 are in an acclimation pen in Ventana, California, and scheduled for release in January 1997, and 90 are in captive-breeding facilities in California and Idaho.

The Arizona release involved cooperation with the Service of a number of organizations, including the Peregrine Fund, the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the Utah Department of Natural Resources, the Hualapai Tribe, the Navajo Nation, the Phoenix, Los Angeles and San Diego zoos, the Bureau of Land Management, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Grand Canyon National Park, and Kaibab National Forest.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages 511 national wildlife refuges covering 92 million acres, as well as 72 national fish hatcheries.

The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, stocks recreational fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that funnels Federal excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies. This program is a cornerstone of the Nation's wildlife management efforts, funding fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, shooting ranges, and related projects across America.